



**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 398
AN ACT ASSISTING STUDENTS ACCEPTED INTO THE DEFERRED ACTION FOR
CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS PROGRAM WITH THE COST OF COLLEGE
FEBRUARY 26, 2015**

Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Subcommittee:

My name is Sister Mary Ellen Burns; I am the Executive Director of Apostle Immigrant Services, an office providing legal and educational services to immigrant communities. I thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony in support of SB 398, a bill which would provide access to certain state-funded tuition to immigrant youth accepted into the “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals” (DACA) program of the US Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Although AIS is located in the Fair Haven section of New Haven – home to successive waves of immigrants since the mid-nineteenth century – our clients come from the greater New Haven area and, in fact, from cities around the state. Since the summer of 2012, we have provided assistance to many young people applying for, and renewing, benefits under the DACA program. The DACA program requires that these young people have entered the United States prior to their sixteenth birthday and that they have received a high school diploma or its equivalent, or be currently enrolled in a program leading to a diploma or GED.

DACA provides these young people with work authorization and therefore the opportunity to “give back” to our city and state a return on what they have received through our elementary and secondary educational systems. Grants of DACA are made for two years at a time; since the summer of 2014, we have helped dozens of young people prepare applications to renew their DACA authorization. We have seen the strides many of them have made since their initial DACA approval, often obtaining employment that makes fuller use of the education they have attained.

We also witness the struggles of many of these young people to earn the money for college or university tuition. Some of them are deferring their dream for higher education indefinitely for this reason; others are pursuing studies a course or two at a time, as they have money for tuition, sometimes having to skip a semester or more. This piecemeal approach to higher education creates a disadvantage for the students themselves as well as for the institutions they are attending.

The proposed legislation would address this issue by allowing these young people, who have already proven themselves tenacious and resourceful, access to student loans that will facilitate access to higher education without gaps in attendance. This clearly will benefit the individual students and their colleges and universities. Our state and localities will profit as well, through the economic advantages that flow from a better-educated work force and through a decrease in the racial and ethnic achievement gaps - currently the worst in the nation.

DACA youth and their families contribute to the State's coffers: through the state income and sales taxes and through locality property taxes (either directly as owners or indirectly as renters). They revitalize residential areas that would otherwise be underpopulated and initiate new businesses at a higher rate than American-born residents. Connecticut would be well served by the enactment of this bill, which will allow these young people to move forward in achieving their dreams and advance the economic condition and cultural vitality of our state as they do so.